

Interdistrict Magnet Schools and Magnet Programs in Connecticut:

An Evaluation Report

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Executive Summary

- The *Sheff v. O'Neill* complaint filed in Hartford in 1989 contended that racial isolation within the Hartford public schools, and the great disparity between urban and suburban students' educational opportunities, denied children the quality education that the state's Constitution guarantees. In response to the *Sheff* decision, Public Act 97-290, "An Act Enhancing Educational Choices and Opportunities," was enacted. This act amended the magnet school statutes and expanded the options for reducing racial, ethnic, and economic isolation among the state's public school students.
- Connecticut education law defines the specific characteristics of interdistrict magnet schools. Section 10-264l, as amended, directed the Department of Education to establish a competitive grant program to assist local and regional boards of education, regional educational service centers and cooperative arrangements pursuant to Section 10-158a with the operation of interdistrict magnet school programs. The section defined "an interdistrict magnet school program" as a program which (1) supports racial, ethnic, and economic diversity, (2) offers a special and high quality curriculum, and (3) requires students to attend at least half time.
- In 1989, the first interdistrict magnet program in Connecticut opened in Hartford: The Greater Hartford Academy for the Arts. During the decade of the 1990s, 17 interdistrict magnet schools and programs emerged throughout the state located in nine different school districts. In the last three years, the number of Connecticut interdistrict magnet schools and programs has increased by 13 to a total of 31, located in 14 public school districts. By fall 2002, over ten thousand students, or about two percent of the state's public school students, from nearly one hundred of the state's public schools, were attending interdistrict magnet schools and magnet programs in Connecticut.
- For fiscal year 2001, the state invested \$22,061,000 in operating grants to support the development and operation of 18 full-time magnet schools and 4 half-time programs. Additionally, \$67,415,000 was allocated for constructing buildings and renovating facilities. Approximately two-third to three-fourths of this construction expense would have been paid to towns for regular school construction had these schools not been designated as interdistrict magnet schools.
- The governance structures vary among the interdistrict magnet schools and magnet programs. In 2000-01, four of the state's regional education centers (RESCs) operated 12 interdistrict magnet schools in 2000-01: Capitol Region Education Council (CREC) - 6, Area Cooperative Educational Services (ACES) - 3, Cooperative Educational Services (CES) - 2, and LEARN -1. Four public

school districts operated 10 interdistrict magnet schools: New Haven – 6, Waterbury – 2, East Hartford – 1, and Norwalk – 1.

- Students attending interdistrict magnet schools, where 42.7 percent of the students are white and 57.3 percent of the students are minorities, are enrolled in more racially balanced schools than those found statewide, where 70.1 percent of the students are white and 29.9 percent are minorities. Interdistrict magnet schools are considerably more balanced than the schools in the low poverty ERG A districts and the high poverty ERG I districts. This creates the opportunity for magnet school students to interact with classmates who bring diverse perspectives to the classroom.
- In 2000-01, interdistrict magnet schools and programs, where 36.5 percent of the students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch and 6.9 percent of the students spoke a primary language other than English in their homes, had more economically diverse student populations than most other schools in the state. In ERG A, the state's 12 most affluent districts, 1.4 percent of the students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch and 3.2 percent were from families in which English was not the first language, while in ERG I, the state's seven high poverty districts, 66.0 percent of the students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, and 39.3 percent were from families in which English was not the first language. Statewide, 23.6 percent of the students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch and for 12.3 percent of their families, English was not the primary language.
- Interdistrict magnet schools and magnet programs drew students from an average of 12 public school districts during the 2000-01 school year, with 60.5 percent of the students residing in the districts where the magnet schools were located and 39.5 percent from feeder school districts.
- Interdistrict magnet school and program teachers and professional staff are more diverse than the public school staff statewide. For the 2000-01 school year, 20.7 percent of the magnet school professional staff were minorities, compared with 7.1 percent statewide.
- Teacher, parent, and student survey responses suggests that interdistrict magnet schools and programs provide learning experiences for students that promote connections among students from different backgrounds and academic opportunities for all students, regardless of background. The connections that begin in the classroom extend beyond it to where students have made friends with schoolmates from different backgrounds than their own, and socialize outside of class and outside of school.
- In 2001-02, approximately 94 percent of Connecticut public school students took the standard grade-level CMT in grades four, six, and eight. The participation

rate for interdistrict magnet school students taking the standard CMT in grades four (98%), six (96%), and eight (97%) exceeded the statewide average.

- The trends in student performance on the 2001 CMT in mathematics, reading, and writing are positive and suggest that the difference between the percentage of interdistrict magnet school students scoring at or above the state goal and the state averages decreases as students complete a greater number of years in interdistrict magnet schools. For fourth grade students, a double-digit difference existed between the average percentages of interdistrict magnet school students scoring at or above the state goal in mathematics, reading, and writing, and the statewide averages. In elementary magnet schools that house grade six, the gap between statewide performance and magnet school performance decreased from the fourth to sixth grade, and for eighth grade students in elementary magnet schools, the differences between magnet school and statewide performance in mathematics and reading in 2001 were reduced to single digits, while the percentage of eighth grade elementary magnet school students meeting the state goal in writing surpassed the statewide average.
- Sixth grade CMT performance in 2001 was consistently higher for students in elementary interdistrict magnet schools than for students in middle magnet schools, who have had at most one year of their school's programming. However, by eighth grade, some of the gap between magnet elementary and middle school student performance found at grade six had been reduced, as had some of the performance gap between magnet middle school students and students statewide.
- Survey data confirm that large proportions of parents and teachers share a common perception that elementary and middle grade interdistrict magnet schools offer high quality academic programs and have high expectations for students' academic performance. The vast majority of students in both elementary and middle magnet schools understand that teachers expect them to do their best work in school, know they must do their best work, and concur that the work they do in school does require their best effort.
- Survey data from the parents of elementary and middle school students indicate that the challenging academic programs that magnet schools offer and the high quality professional staff the schools employ are the two primary reasons why parents select magnet elementary and middle schools for their children.
- For both First and Second Generation CAPTs, magnet high school students' participation rates for standard CAPT administrations exceed statewide averages and approach the participation rate found in ERG A schools. Compared with the statewide averages, relatively small percentages of interdistrict magnet high school grade ten students score at or above the state goal on each of the four subtests, although the proportion of magnet school students meeting goal has increased modestly over the last four years, and has been increasing at a faster rate than the statewide averages.

- Interdistrict magnet high school graduate achievement data are more promising. Smaller proportions of interdistrict magnet high school students than students statewide drop out of high school prior to graduation. During their high school careers larger proportions of magnet school graduates complete algebra I and chemistry, than graduates statewide, and enroll in advanced placement courses. The percentage of magnet graduates taking the SAT annually has been well above the statewide average, while total SAT performance has been at or above the local and ERG I levels. After graduation, magnet school students enroll in two- or four-year college programs in larger percentages than graduates statewide.
- Survey data suggest that the majority of magnet high school and magnet program parents and teachers believe their schools offer high quality academic experiences for students and have high expectations for students' academic performance. Most magnet high school and magnet program parents believe their children find the school challenging academically, are enthusiastic about learning, and have made academic progress, with the level of agreement higher among magnet program parents than magnet high school parents.
- Survey data from the parents of magnet high school and magnet program students indicate the quality of teachers and administrators, and the challenge of the academic program are central to parents' decisions to enroll their children in interdistrict magnet high schools and programs.
- Survey results suggest that interdistrict magnet elementary, middle and high school teachers and magnet program teachers believe that the climate in their schools supports children as learners and teachers and staff members as professionals, their schools promote innovation and foster collaboration among professional staff members on curricular and instructional issues, their principals are effective instructional leaders who encourage professionals to actively participate in instructional decisions, communicate openly with staff, and are available to discuss classroom and instructional issues. While teachers are satisfied with the human and material resources their interdistrict magnet schools provide, in general, some teachers cite insufficient resources specific to their school's needs such as assistant principals or additional special education teachers.
- More than half of the professionals in all the state's interdistrict magnet schools and programs strongly agree they are satisfied with their positions, a proportion considerably higher than the national average, where less than one-third of public school teachers are highly satisfied with their work.
- Parent survey responses indicate that most magnet school and magnet program parents believe their schools provide a safe and secure environment that fosters learning, have appropriate behavioral standards that most students adhere to, and provide adequate human and material resources to support the school's program.

Some middle and high school parents expressed concerns about the lack of after-school athletic programs in their child's school.

- There is agreement across teacher, parent, and student survey responses that as students progress through higher school levels, parents have less first-hand knowledge about the schools their children attend and are less involved in the schools.
- Student survey responses suggest that interdistrict magnet school and magnet program students, for the most part, feel safe and secure in their schools, believe students understand school behavior rules and, to a lesser extent, students follow the established rules, although their responses were less positive than those of teachers or parents in the same school groups.
- Eighty percent or more of students in elementary and middle magnet schools and in magnet programs indicate that their school's theme is used in their classes, considerably higher than students in magnet high schools where less than half agree. Particularly for magnet high schools, students' perceptions that the school theme is integrated into classroom instruction are decidedly lower than teachers' perceptions.
- While the majority of magnet school and magnet program students complete homework on a daily basis, smaller proportions believe that the homework they do actually helps them to learn at high levels. As students progress through higher grades, parents are less likely to assist them with their homework, and they are less apt to complete daily assignments.
- More than 80 percent of the elementary school, middle school, and magnet program students and two-thirds of the magnet high school students consider the pace at which they are learning appropriate.
- Magnet school and program students provided mixed responses to statements about the availability and use of resources in their schools. Large proportions of elementary and middle school students are in classes where teachers use technology and in schools where they have access to computers and technology to improve their learning. Across all school groups most students acknowledge that the texts and materials they use in their classes relate to what they learn and that they use materials in addition to their textbooks to learn. Elementary magnet school students were most satisfied with the variety of co-curricular activities their schools offer, while magnet high school students were least satisfied. Students' written responses identified a lack of athletic activities and sports teams as a concern for middle and high school students.
- In 2000-01, seven interdistrict magnet elementary schools were operating in Connecticut; by the beginning of the 2002-03 school year four more had opened. All offer a comprehensive academic curriculum with a theme embedded across

- the curriculum. The themes of these elementary schools include the Montessori developmental curriculum; science, technology, global studies and anti-bias education; multicultural education; educating the whole child based on the Comer-Zigler model; Edison Schools curriculum; integrated arts; multiple intelligence approach to curriculum and instruction; and character education.
- Two middle grade interdistrict magnet schools were operating in 2000-01 and four new middle schools opened by the beginning of the 2002-03 school year. Each offers a comprehensive academic program with a specialized theme and all emphasize technology. The themes also include international/global education; integrated arts; science and mathematics; and communication.
 - In 2000-01 six full-day interdistrict high schools offered comprehensive college preparatory programs to students in Connecticut; by fall 2002, two additional interdistrict magnet high schools had opened. The school themes include: cooperative, thematic programs based on student's needs and interests; community involvement; the arts; career exploration and preparation in the business/computer and medical/allied health fields; character education; middle college education model; science and medicine.
 - During the fall 2000-01 school year, four half-day and two school-within-school interdistrict magnet programs provided specialized curriculums to complement students' local high school programs in the arts, mathematics and science, Japanese studies, and the International Baccalaureate curriculum.
 - The most effective magnet schools and programs in Connecticut have several common characteristics. First, these schools have principals who are highly regarded as instructional leaders in their school community, and often have an additional administrator responsible for the managerial aspects of operating the school. Second, successful schools have a mission which incorporates a theme that is clearly integrated across the entire academic program, focused on improving student academic performance, and embraced by all constituents. The theme connects students with the school and with teachers who share a common interest. Third, administrators and teachers have access to student achievement data and use it to make instructional decisions. Teachers use multiple strategies to monitor and assess student learning. Fourth, parents are actively invested in their child's education and involved in their schools. Fifth, teachers, parents, and students have high expectations for student performance. Finally, all members of the school community believe they are accountable for improving student academic performance.
 - The data also suggest that there is still work to be done to continue to improve the magnet schools and programs that currently operate in Connecticut. While the evaluation answered the questions outlined in the first chapter of the report, it also uncovered additional questions that merit addressing at the school level:
 1. Why are students' perceptions of the climates within their schools less

positive than those of their teachers and parents, and what can schools do to enhance their climates so that all children feel safe, secure, and respected?

2. While many students are satisfied with the academic progress they are making, what can magnet schools do to insure that all students make the academic progress they desire?
3. How can magnet schools and programs increase parents' investment in their own child's education and involvement in the school, particularly beyond the elementary level?
4. While magnet high school graduates have posted solid academic accomplishments, what can magnet schools do during the school day and after school to increase the engagement of students during the first two years of their high school careers?

The answers to these questions will help the good schools and programs currently operating in Connecticut become better at addressing the academic and social needs of all students they enroll.

➤ Some more general issues which affect the magnet school movement in Connecticut need to be addressed as well:

1. Many of the currently operating interdistrict magnet schools and programs could serve as models that could be replicated in other locations throughout the state. Providing incentives to encourage districts and other governing agencies to replicate established, effective programs and practices, rather than initiating newly designed programs, would reduce school 'start-up' time and some of the instructional issues new interdistrict magnet schools and programs encounter.
2. The lack of 100 percent state funded transportation from some feeder districts to interdistrict magnet schools is a disincentive for some parents to enroll their children.
3. Regional plans for creating future magnet schools and programs need to be established to provide students with opportunities for a pre-kindergarten through grade 12 interdistrict magnet school education.
4. Redefining half-day magnet 'programs' as half-day magnet 'schools' would require them to complete all school-level state reports, such as those relevant to the Strategic School Profiles, which provide information to the state and public about their operation and adherence to state policies.

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